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Book review: A. PRIMOR, “...mit Ausnahme Deutschlands” – Als Botschafter Israels in Bonn

Berlin, Ullstein, 1997, 272 pages.

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A. PRIMOR, “...mit Ausnahme Deutschlands” – *Als Botschafter Israels in Bonn*”, Berlin, Ullstein, 1997, 272 pages.

The present ambassador of Israel in Germany, Avi Primor, is a man of parole: he took some distance with the president of his own country, Ezer Weizman, when the latter, on official visit in Bonn, confessed to not understanding that some Jews could still live on German territory. He also triggered off the fury of the former president of the Knesset when he declared that German-Israeli relationships were from now on like a healed wound but which would have still a scar remaining. Moreover it is from this picture that the book should have been named (title of the last chapter of these present memoirs), in contrast with the perspective generally admitted: this wound can not be healed.

Here Primor demonstrates that he is also a man of writing, who tries to give a message across 260 pages of pleasant reading. A sign of the times, symbol of the “normalization” he claims to promote, Primor has not waited to leave his post to reveal his impressions, unlike two of his predecessors, Asher Ben Natan and Yohanan Meroz¹ had done: this exception characterizes his frankness, but also the new potential of the German-Israeli relationships.

Primor nevertheless insisted on setting his book under the sign of the hallmark which defines these relations: the title of the book is taken from the phrase which was on the first Israeli passports, valid for all countries “except Germany”. By this choice, the diplomat is not pessimistic; he insists on describing constantly changing ties, similar to the situation in the Middle East. This choice illustrates also the difficult position of the author: between Germany in favor of the peace process and the Israeli government which opts at least for firmness and from which he doesn’t hesitate to take distance. But Primor has some advantage in his enterprise: indeed he is the first ambassador in Bonn from the Hebrew State who was not born in the Germanic territory, hence the absence of direct contact with this culture at the beginning. Through his professional relations he first had to meet with the representatives of Bonn. His initial picture of Germany, tinged with preconceived ideas and reproaches (well justified) switches then to a more favorable approach, defined above all by realism.

¹ Ben Natan A., *Briefe an den Botschafter*, Frankfurt, Ullstein, 1972 (French translation, *Dialogue avec les Allemands*, Paris, Plon, 1974); Meroz, Y., *In schwieriger Mission: als Botschafter Israels in Bonn*, Frankfurt, Ullstein, 1986.

His personal evolution serves as a background framework for a general description of the progression in the German-Israeli relationship: from the strong reluctance in the beginning, when “there is no question of recognizing such a people” (p. 33), to the rapid rapprochement wanted by Ben Gurion, with the uncertainties due to the difficult situation in the Eastern Mediterranean (in particular when the West Germans do everything they can to establish close relationships with the Arab Countries). This evolution leads even to a quite unexpected situation, because Germany represents from now on one of the privileged destinations of the Jews who leave the ex-USSR.

This rapid picture, which contains some generalizations, approximations or errors, does not aim at offering a thematic analysis of the problem in question. Primor’s perspective, agent and observer at the same time, nevertheless allows the reader to be introduced quickly into a context which is exceptional and marked by the main debates and crises of the last decades. It will be interesting in this matter to focus another time on the anti-German reactions which have characterized the Israeli public opinion at the time of the Gulf War; or to remember the preoccupations of the Hebrew State when facing the historical reflections which have been debated in recent years in Germany: “debate of the historians” in the 1980s, used in a different way by the itinerant exhibition dedicated to the “dirty war” that the Wehrmacht conducted on the East Front, or by the german-german debate resulting from the publication of the book by Daniel Goldhagen on the “Hitler’s Willing Executioners”². That is why Primor can speak of the «specific role of Germany in the political consciousness of the Israeli people” (p. 97).

Primor’s asserted character and the distance he takes give high benefit to this book. It is because, beyond the feelings and resentments, realism comes out on top. The German past and the Shoah (the “eternal enigma”, p. 115) remain very present in his mind, but it is not a reason, according to him, for reopening the wounds which seem to him highly sterile. On the contrary, the pains of the past, for him, can be windows to the future. This explains the final note full of hope: as Europe has been able to unify itself in order to go beyond the divisions, the Middle East must from now on bring together its interests and move ahead. An optimistic message at a time when the darkest clouds accumulate there. But the author helps us to believe in it by showing frankly a weakened State of Israel, which has little to do with the unfavorable picture that the media draw of it.

² Goldhagen, D.J., *Hitler’s Willing Executioners – Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, New York, Knopf, 1996 (French translation, *Les bourreaux volontaires d’Hitler*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1997).

In this matter Primor fits well within the perspective of a new history. To emphasize the frank realism, to refute the myths, such seem to be his objectives which he summarizes in this laconic motto: “Rien n’est jamais acquis” (p. 261, in french in the text).

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